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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that traditional African dance can develop fitness and health particularly for those interested in both health and African culture. A discussion of fitness concludes that this quality enables the body to perform physical activities with greater efficiency and that all the qualities commonly found in notions of fitness are found in traditional African dance. A description of African traditional dance characterizes it as dance passed down over generations particularly in West and South Africa. It often mimics daily life, animals, or natural phenomena, or it has tribal or ritualistic aspects. A discussion of African dance and fitness argues that this form improves emotional well-being by relieving stress, improves social skills by providing a chance to interact with people, offers intellectual stimulation by providing new movement information to be analyzed, and promotes spirituality by providing a relationship with nature and the environment through movement. A conclusion states that those who participate in traditional African dance classes and activities find them interesting and satisfying. These qualities make it an effective way to achieve aerobic fitness thereby improving health and quality of life. (JB)

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TRADITIONAL AFRICAN DANCE: AN EXCELLENT APPROACH TO FITNESS AND HEALTH

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TRADITIONAL AFRICAN DANCE: AN EXCELLENT APPROACH TO FITNESS AND HEALTH

The use of traditional African dance as a means to develop fitness, especially cardiorespiratory (aerobic) fitness, and promote health is an excellent approach. The development and maintenance of physical fitness is an important aspect of optimal health, and can be achieved through many physical activities including traditional African dance.

Today Fitness is advocated through various types of activities by many people. Video, audio, and written materials abound, from fitness professionals to popular entertainers. Media play an important role in providing constructive programs which encourage and help fitness seekers achieve their goals. Having a variety of activities to choose from is neccessary as needs and physical capabilities vary. Some people may prefer one type of exercise activity, while others may prefer something entirely different, therefore the more choices, the better.

What is Fitness?

There seems to be no one universal definition of it, but there are basic consentual concepts about fitness. For example, Greenberg and Pargman (1989) considers it as, "the ability to do ones's work and have energy remaining for basic recreational activities" (p.2). Thaxton, (1988,) sees fitness as being "a condition in which the systems of the

body are able to function at their optimal efficiency" (p. 17). Other definitions of fitness include:

> the characteristics of a body that enable it to perform physical activity; more broadly, the ability to meet routine physical demands with enough reserve energy to rise to a sudden challenge; or the body's ability to withstand stresses of all kinds (Debruyne, Sizer, Whitney; 1991, p.2)

As you can see, all these definitions, just to give a few, have the same basic idea or philosophy. That is, that fitness enables the body to perform physical activities with greater efficiency.

Being totally fit, however, encompasses more than one type of fitness since the body is comprised of more than one physiological system. Total fitness includes muscular strength, endurance, flexibility, and cardiorespiratory endurance. Although all the body's systems need to be maintained for maximum efficiency, it takes different types of exercise activities to accomplish it. For cardiovascular-respiratory fitness, aerobic type activities are needed. Aerobic exercises are those that activate the cardiorespiratory system to supply the amount of needed oxygen to working muscles in order to sustain their energy production. Aerobic activities use the total body, elevate the heart rate, are rhythmic, and can be performed for a prolonged period of time, depending upon ones fitness level. All these characteristics are inherent in traditional African dance.

What is Traditional African Dance?

Traditional African dance is the dance of the ancestors, which may be hundreds of years old, that has been preserved and passed down generation after generation. The traditional dance referred to is that from West and South Africa. It's steps, and movements, for the most part, represent everyday lifestyle. Movements, therefore, often display some type of physical work, i.e. planting and harvesting. They may also take on the characteristics of a hunt or warfare, and many movements mimic animals and birds as well. Some traditional African dance is referred to as tribal and/or ritual, while other is for pleasure or entertainment. In a small or tribal society, that is, outside of large metropolitan cities, "dance is a feature of every significant occassion and event crucial to tribal existence as part of ritual.... It does not stand alone as a separate activity or profession" (Cass, 1993, p.2). Because dance is an integral part of lifestyle, there are dances for events such as, the birth of a child, there are initiation dances, there are dances for a good crop and harvest, dances for rain and, dances to open roads and public buildings, also dances for when a person dies, "the birth to life cycle" (Blum, 1973). Dance represents the season's of man's life.

> These human seasons have their correspondence in the solar wheel; spring or planting time; summer, the growing time; autumn, the harvest time; then winter the dead season which has in its other solstice sleep, and then the rebirth of the sun (Goer, 1979, p.7).

Traditional African Dance and Fitness

With all the different reasons for African dance, there exists a great variety of movements and step patterns. Most are vigorous and can be used for a high intensity workout, while others are of a milder form and can be used for a low-impact workout. They use the total body in a wonderfully polyrythmic manner and can be long duration activities, if ones physical condition permits. In South Africa native gold miners dance for the recreation of it as Westerners do for team games and competitive sports. "Without their dances, these men would not think life worth living. Music and dancing are their constant companions throughout their lives" (Tracey, 1952, p. 1).

Traditional African Dance and Health

Fitness is a very important aspect of optimal health, but it is however, just that, only one aspect of health. According to the World Health Organization since 1947, "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity". This has been the most quoted definition since that time. Hahn and Payne has extended that concept of health to include intellectual and spiritual well-being as well as physical, mental and social. They consider health to be, "the blending of your physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual resources as they assist you in mastering the developmental tasks necessary for you

to enjoy a satisfying and productive life" (1991, p. 9). Health is a state whereby all five dimensions of the individual are integrated and well balanced.

Traditional African dance can not only improve the physical dimensions of health but can also help the other dimensions. It can improve the emotional dimension by relieving stress; the social demension by providing a means to interact with people; the intellectual dimension by providing new movement information to be analyzed; the spiritual dimension by providing, through movement, a relationship with nature and the environment.

Optimal health should be a priority for all. Good health requires that we pay attention to what our body needs, and provide it. Staying in good health can not be taken for granted, it has to be worked on. We not only need proper nutrition, we need exercise as well. Muscles have to be used to maintain their efficiency as the human body is designed that way. Therefore, participating in traditional African dance, which is fun and beneficial, can help you to keep those muscles in good condition and maintain good health in the process. Many people appreciate African dance for its artistic and aesthetic values, but do not consider its health values. Once you experience a vigorous African dance workout, if you are knowledgeable about cardiorespiratory endurance, you will realize how effective this dance activity can be. If you are not aware of what develops cardiorespiratory endurance, you will just feel

tired and exhausted, but you will also feel exhilarated.

Where to find a traditional African dance class may be a question for many. They are being taught in most major cities, as well as in many colleges and universities. Some children in elementary and high school have the opportunity of learning African dance and they are finding that it is a fun activity. It is a wonderful way to provide a movement experience for children and adults alike.

At Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York, there is no dance program, but there is an African dance class offered. Students in the class find that it is the perfect opportunity to not only learn about African lifestyle through dance, but to relieve some of the stress and tension common to student life. They often comment how much they look forward to the class for just that reason. They find it relaxing, even if they have trouble executing some of the dance movements. They also realize how much of a workout they get and some express how much they need that. Another way that they often describe the class is that it is "fun", and for them that is the key. When learning is fun and enjoyable it is appreciated more and is most likely more effective. An important factor in maintaining an exercise program is choosing an activity that you enjoy because interest is a key factor in adhering to it. Some people enjoy solitary exercise activities such as jogging, while others prefer those that provide a social atmosphere, like aerobic dance and African dance. I agree with Di Gennaro

(1983) when he states that, "in complying to a rather basic characteristic of human nature, people will persist in the performance of physical activities they find interesting and satisfying....."(p. 192).

In conclusion most people who participate in traditional African dance classes and activities find that it is interesting and satisfying. These qualities make it a very effective way to achieve aerobic fitness, thereby improving health and quality of life.

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